Introduction

This is a book about the theater phenomenon. It is an extension of notes on the theater and theatergoing that have been accumulating for some time. It does not have an argument, or set out to prove a thesis, and it will not be one of those useful books one reads for the fruits of its research. Moreover, it is not even a phenomenology of the theater, properly speaking. Such a project, as I understand it, would imply a far more thorough and scientific consideration of every aspect of theater than I have presented here. Rather, I have tried to write a form of critical description that is phenomenological in the sense that it focuses on the activity of theater making itself out of its essential materials: speech, sound, movement, scenery, text, etc. Like most phenomenological description, it will succeed to the extent that it awakens the reader’s memory of his own perceptual encounters with theater. If the book fails in this I imagine it will be about as interesting to read as an anthology of someone else’s dreams. In any case, I am less concerned with the scientific purity of my perspective and method than with retrieving something from the theater experience that seems to me worthy of our critical admiration.

We may come closer to the nature of this "something" by posing an old question to which there is surely no adequate answer: What is the origin of theater? A historical explanation would probably refer us
to the ritual function of securing various advantages for the community. A phenomenological explanation would begin by asking the question in another way: What kind of being would choose impersonation as a means of securing any advantage? Surely theater's origins and purposes are not exhausted in the idea that man wants to imitate the world, as it is or as it should be, or to make the crops do his bidding, or to honor the gods, or simply to entertain his fellow man, if by that we mean offering fictions about his social and private life. If impersonation has the power to do these things, then the power itself must be prior to and independent of them. For the work of art, Heidegger says, is characterized by the fact that it is never "used up"; it does not, like the tool, "disappear into usefulness." 1 It remains beneath all purposes an assertion of a certain power to create, to bring forth. What is it that is brought forth? We find this helpful beginning in Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art:

[The sculpture] is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how the god looks; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus is the god himself. The same holds for the linguistic work. In the tragedy nothing is staged or displayed theatrically, but the battle of the new gods against the old is being fought. The linguistic work, originating in the speech of the people, does not refer to this battle; it transforms the people's saying so that now every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flighty, what master and what slave (p. 43).

On first glance we seem to be bordering here on the old familiar idea, deriving from Schiller, of the naïveté of the ancients: that is, the marvelous ability of ancient man to enter directly into nature—having never been separated from it—and to see his gods in his images, and his purposes in his gods. But if Heidegger’s idea were based on something so nostalgic it would not help us with the problem of the motive behind impersonation. If we take this romantic interpretation of the passage, obvious problems arise: Did this capacity to “let the god himself be present” cease when the gods disappeared from the text and the subject of the tragedy became the fighting of earthly battles? Was the hero who came after the god “present” in the same way, and after the hero, the merchant and the courtesan and the braggart soldier? Or does this capacity imply a special and solemn belief, as in the Christian’s belief that he is consuming the body of Christ in the holy sacrament? Does it diminish—this presence—as the pleasure principle displaces the spiritual principle in drama?

What Heidegger means here is not a literal presence of the god, but a presence that makes it unnecessary to refer elsewhere for the god. It is the truth of the god that arrives on the stage and not the stage that refers to a real god beyond it, existing in some unavailable form.2 But we must not take this word truth in a vacant and abstract sense. In fact, the point Heidegger is making has

2. Hegel’s explanation of this phenomenon: “[The gods] are made, invented, but are not fictitious. They certainly come forth out of the human imagination in contrast to what actually exists, but they do this as essential forms, and this product of the mind is at the same time recognized as being what is essential” (Hegel on Tragedy, eds. Anne and Henry Paolucci [New York: Harper & Row, 1975], p. 312).
nothing to do with gods at all. The same principle of presence applies to Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant shoes. We know these are not real peasant shoes, and they are not painted substitutes for peasant shoes elsewhere. But that is an irrelevant factor, for it is not a matter of our vision shuttling back and forth between memory and pigment. It is obvious that we recognize these forms as shoes, but that does not mean that we consciously refer to a shoe-concept somewhere else, or earlier, or to something packed up in the mind’s closet of known things. Everything about the painting forestalls such a movement of mind and draws us, as Heidegger says, into its “riff.” “In the vicinity of the work we are suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be” (p. 35). This “somewhere else” is not a spatial elsewhere in the sense that the mind thinks of being elsewhere (with the real god, or in the room with the real shoes in the painting, or on this landscape Constable has “copied” in his painting), but in the sense that what is before us, the painting itself, offers a different kind of here than we “usually tend to be” in. The painting is a place of disclosure, not a place of reference. What is disclosed cannot be found elsewhere because it does not exist outside the painting. Hints of the painting exist in nature perhaps. When we next look at a pair of worn shoes we will see the “equipmental” qualities Van Gogh painted, but how is it that we did not see them before? The painting—shades of Oscar Wilde!—has perhaps altered our perception of reality. It does not make sense to say that all of the qualities of the shoes in Van Gogh’s painting are in the real peasant shoes. Shoes are constantly being repainted by painters as possessing different qualities from those Van Gogh saw. Do these real shoes I am wearing, for example,
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possess qualities to be found in other shoe paintings I have never seen? If all of these qualities are in the shoes now, some of them dormantly waiting to be uncovered by future shoe painters, then we live in a very odd universe. Plainly there is something deficient about the referential principle as a basis of art.

It would be as absurd to argue that there is no referential, or mimetic, relation between art and reality as it is to argue that art is an imitation of reality. My purpose in presenting Heidegger's view here is not to restrict the nature of art's truth (or truths), or to endorse this particular view above others, but, as Heidegger would say, to open a clearing within the topic of art itself where we can be free of certain biases of the mimetic theory. The longstanding problem of mimetic theory is that it is obliged to define art in terms of what it is not, to seek a source of artistic representation in the subject matter of art, and to point to a place where it can be found, if only in a set of abstract ideas or truths, or in some field of essences or archetypes. The most important sentence ever written about drama, Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the imitation of an action, contains the whole range of mimetic theory's frustrations and ambiguity. These two virtually co-reflexive terms, imitation and action, come at us, in John Webster's figure, like two chained bullets. In one sense the term imitation of implies that the action is outside the drama, "a form," as John Jones says, "which the tragedian contemplates, and it stands logically and chronologically before the business of composition."³ But in another sense, the term action seems to want to refer to some-

thing inside the play, an "indwelling form," a "soul," an "order of events," etc., and so the term imitation takes on a second character as the medium in which the work presents its representation. Could we have it both ways, prior to and concurrent with, inside and outside? I do not see why not. It seems unreasonable to try to repeal a history as interesting as that of our revisions of this endlessly fascinating sentence. What does seem important is that when we read the sentence one way or another we do not fall under the illusion that we are scientists reaching the correct solution to the problem. And so it is with phenomenological description: it is only a means of going all the way to the end of one of art's self-contradicting paths.

If my book has an even distantly polemical cast it is to be found in its neighborly reaction to semiotics, which is mimetic theory's most thriving relative. This may seem an odd gathering of clan but in the present context we might define semiotics as the scientific analysis of the means, or apparatus, of the mimetic process. In other words, what mimetic theory and semiotics, and the criticisms respectively derived from them, have in common is that they see theater as a process of mediation between artist and culture, speaker and listener; theater becomes a passageway for a cargo of meanings being carried back to society (after artistic refinement) via the language of signs. I do not see this as a deficiency of the semiotic enterprise; it is simply its particular project. One could no more expect semiotics to talk about anything else than one could have expected New Criticism, in its day, to talk about the neurosis of the play's hero or the author's autobiographical presence in his work. The fact is, any critical perspec-
tive is doomed to be narrow. It must be itself with a vengeance if it is to realize its potential for illumination. What is disturbing, if anything, about semiotics is not its narrowness but its almost imperialistic confidence in its product: that is, its implicit belief that you have exhausted a thing’s interest when you have explained how it works as a sign.

The problem with semiotics is that in addressing theater as a system of codes it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression theater makes on the spectator. And, as Merleau-Ponty has said, “It is impossible . . . to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts.” Moreover, the more one treats theater as a language the more like all languages it becomes. Thus the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer only language. When the critic posits a division in the art image, he may be saying something about language, but he is no longer talking about art, or at least about the affective power of art.

This seems to me the primary limitation of a strictly semiotic perspective as we find it being applied to the study of theater. It is perhaps best expressed by Sigurd Burckhardt’s idea that “the nature and primary function of the most important poetic devices”—among which we could include the devices of the theater—“is to release words in some measure from their bondage

to meaning, their purely referential role, and to give or restore to them the corporeality which a true medium needs." In other words, what speech would be saying, in Burckhardt's sense, is that it isn't so much a carrier of a content (a story, a signified) as a medium that can only be animated by a content.

Even so, it seems to me that semiotics is a useful, if incomplete, discipline. It has become evident to me, in arriving at my own form of narrowness, that semiotics and phenomenology are best seen as complementary perspectives on the world and on art. I would like to pursue this notion further because there are times when I can be caught, so to speak, borrowing my neighbor's tools to build my own structures. If we think of semiotics and phenomenology as modes of seeing, we might say that they constitute a kind of binocular vision: one eye enables us to see the world phenomenally; the other eye enables us to see it significatively. These are the abnormal extremes of our normal vision. Lose the sight of your phenomenal eye and you become a Don Quixote (everything is something else); lose the sight of your significative eye and you become Sartre's Roquentin (everything is nothing but itself). Certainly the significative is the stronger—or at least the steadier—eye, which is to say that we tend to see the world as something we get through. But now and then the world detains us. For example: I am walking to the bus terminal to get my ride home. Suddenly, as I approach, the bus parked in the lot strikes me as being outrageously large and rectangular. It is heavy with material and texture; it is not a

bus, it is a queer, unforeseen shape. This may be the result of the sun coming off it in a certain way, it may be my mood; but I find myself arrested by this thing. I see it almost as an artist might: as a study in form. But I must get on the bus if I am to make it home. So I climb aboard, with the help of my significative eye, and I project myself home—is there any mail? Did the plumber come today? What’s for dinner? All of these anticipations are softened, however, because on the bus I read a newspaper, which is another way of not being where I am.

This is perhaps too personal an analogy, but by it I wish to express only the everyday nature of perceptual extremes: the thing, one might say, when it loses its lostness and appears before me, stripped of its functions; and the thing in its transportational value—its utility, what it means, what this strange/familiar thing will do for me. In its special way art is made of a fusion of these extremes. Actually, this a very old idea, for we are simply using modern terms and modern instances to restate a proposition of Horace: Poetry blends in one the delightful and the useful. Horace’s meaning of the word “useful” (utile) is probably not in need of modern redefinition, but we must update the word “delightful” (dulce) if we are to make the point clear. Delight, it seems to me, could be translated as wrappedness in the image—not, as Dr. Johnson would say, for its “just gesture and elegant modulation,”6 or for its successful

6. Samuel Johnson. The Works of Samuel Johnson (Oxford: W. Pickering, 1825), 5:121. The context of the quotation is: “The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. They came to hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation.”
execution of conventional usage, but for its autonomous life, or *liveliness* (to use a word particularly pertinent to theater). Thus there is a playful tug-of-war in the image between the useful and the delightful. Usefulness implies the image’s transitivity, its sign-ness, or convertability into social, moral, or educational energy; delight implies its “corporeality” and the immediate absorption of the image by the senses. So the sign/image is a Janus-faced thing: it wants to say something about something, to be a sign, and it wants to be something, a thing in itself, a site of beauty. Blissfully ignorant of the problems of deep structure, Horace simply called this a blend of functions, no more separable than body and soul, no more explainable by a science of language than architecture is explainable by the sciences of physics and engineering.

Perhaps two modern variations of this tension, concerned with very different projects, will illustrate its persistence as a way of organizing our perspectives on the image. I am immediately reminded of Baudelaire’s opposition of the significative (or ordinary) comic and the absolute (or grotesque) comic: the ordinary comic is always useful, “its element being visibly *double*—art and the moral idea”; the absolute comic “comes much closer to nature” and “emerges as a *unity* which calls for the intuition to grasp it.” 7 Baudelaire is concerned strictly with “the essence” of laughter, but surely it would not be stretching his polarity too far to see a generic connection between laughter and delight; and one of the forms of

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laughter is the delight we take in the image. It need not even be a laughing image. To move to my second instance: one of Roland Barthes’s tasks was to dismantle the accretion of signs that forms the received world of our modern mythologies—that is, the shared and therefore invisible world—and to reconstruct it, as it were, from the inside out by arresting its signs in their purest imagistic state. Only such an imagination could have approached the photograph (in Camera Lucida) as an interplay of the studium and the punctum. The studium is what one perceives in a photograph as the result of one’s cultural preparation, or “a certain training,” whereby we become the makers and consumers of photographs carrying what one might call our pictorial mythologies—beautiful sunsets, polluted sunsets, the many moods of the city, children being themselves, animals being “almost human,” the Smiths posing happily at the Grand Canyon. The studium is “always coded” (p. 51) and “always refers to a classical body of information” (pp. 25–26); it is, in short, what we know without knowing it, what we see without seeing it. The punctum is a much rarer element (all photos do not have a punctum) and, unless I am mistaken, the punctum constitutes, for Barthes, the personal value of the photograph and perhaps its value as a work of art. The punctum is what elevates the picture above its studium, above being simply what we expect. It is “the wound” made by a “detail” which “paradoxically, while remaining a ‘detail,’ . . . fills the whole picture”; it is, finally, a seeming “accident” or “cast of the dice” in which the photo seems “to anni-

late itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself” (p. 45).

These terms were designed strictly for the analysis of the photograph; but in essence they descend from the same vision I have been describing here. One of the things I deal with in this book (and a whole book could be written on the subject) is the passage of the stage image into conventionality, or sign-hood. I suggest that conventions occur first as anticonventions, or anti-signs (antistudia would do just as well): that is, to the extent that something is a convention, it is also a sign, meaning that it has taken its place as one of the efficient and invisible chips in the informational circuitry. But how did it get there in the first place if not as an attempt to break into the circuit, to pester the circuit with nuance, to wound it with the resistance of its presence? In other words, it began as an image in which the known world was, in some sense, being recreated or revised out of its primal linguistic matter. In some such way all images, to one degree or another, erupt delightfully and claim their presence as a site of disclosure, putting us “somewhere else than we usually tend to be.” Without this character as site, there is no delight, only the passage of information.

9. As another instance of this same passage, here is James L. Calderwood on the life cycle of the metaphor: “Each successful new metaphor is a creative insight and for a time gives off a spark of aesthetic pleasure. So long as tension exists between tenor and vehicle—so long as there is an element of the negative in our awareness that is not what it literally claims to be—the metaphor remains metaphoric. With wear, however, this tension slackens, and the metaphor collapses into an inert name—or more familiarly ‘dies’” (Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad: Richard II to Henry V [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979], p. 14).
This phenomenal renewal is what, in my view, keeps the life in theater. In this pursuit, no doubt, theater belongs with all art, but its peculiar way of belonging is what I have tried to examine in these essays. In point of its organization, the book is divided into two parts titled (with a nod to Kenneth Burke's famous "ratios") *The Scene* and *The Actor*. These are really two perspectives from which theater can be viewed rather than two separate subjects. I take it that we can consider them as fundamental perspectives in the sense that Molière spoke of the theater as consisting of a platform (a scene) and a couple of passions (actors). Looking at theater as *scene* I am interested primarily in its way of using the tools of speech and carpentry to create a world. Obviously, the tool of speech puts us immediately on the ground of Part 2 (*The Actor*), but here I am considering the actor strictly as scene maker and not as performer. In the first chapter ("The World on Stage") I develop the idea that theater is a rather predatory institution that not only holds a mirror up to nature but consumes nature as well. It may be an unflattering figure, but the more I have thought about theater the more I see it as having the characteristics of an organism: it feeds on the world as its nourishment, it adapts to cultural climate and conditions that necessitate periodic shifts in direction and speed, and finally it exhausts itself and dies—one of its traditions, like generations, replacing another. Chapter 1 is an overview dealing mainly, one might say, with food gathering; chapters 2 and 3 present a more or less anatomical view of three major species of theater: the poetic stage of Shakespeare and the practical stage of naturalism (chapter 2), and the experimental theater that has dominated this century since the advent of expressionism (chapter 3).
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Viewing theater from the standpoint of the actor, we encounter a very different set of phenomenological problems. We are not in the least interested in the psychology of the actor (how he prepares, what he thinks and feels while acting, and so on) but in the psychology—if that is the best word—of the audience viewing the actor. We want to know what we see in and through the actor as the instrument on which the text of the play is performed. Chapter 1 (“Actor/Text”) is concerned mainly with the presence of the actor on stage and the question of his essential influence on the dramatist (how, for example, does the fiction written for the actor differ from one written for a reader?). Chapter 2 (“Actor/Audience”) treats acting as a form of speech addressed to an audience. That is, on the textual side the actor creates the conditions that define the limits of theater as an art form; on the audience side he makes theater occur. As speaker, the actor may be listened to in different ways; we may hear and see him in different keys of perception (what significance is there, for example, in the fact that the actor speaks to be overheard but speaks as if he weren’t being overheard?). In any case, this final chapter, ending in a brief phenomenology of the curtain call, is less about the art of acting than about the complex act of seeing and hearing the actor as a kind of healthy schizophrenic who is living two lives at the same time.

It has occurred to me, in fact, that most of the book was written from a theater seat in my mind’s eye. As a consequence, it is quite possible that an actor or a director reading it will find some of its assumptions naive in exactly the sense that poets frequently find readers’ interpretations of their work wrong or “not at all what
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was intended”—or, “not at all what we do in the theater or how we do what we do.” An Actor—I keep hearing a mythical actor say—would not think of Lear’s “Blow winds” as a dangerous speech (one of my claims). “He would simply do it, and that’s that!” I certainly hope so. But in my theater seat I am waiting for this speech because it is a big one and I want the actor to be up to it. He is in danger here of failing to be Lear, and I would assume that if he thinks about this while doing the speech, he is probably already deeply in the remote danger I see as being both the risk and the perceptual thrill of his art.

Finally, I must warn the reader that Prince Hamlet seems to lurk around every corner in this latter half of the book. At one point I thought of following the example of Kierkegaard in The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates and somehow sneaking Hamlet into my title, as if he had been part of my plan all along. Since this proved awkward and entirely transparent, I will only offer a brief plea for my reader’s patience with the terrible truth: my addiction to the play. I have never been able to resist poking about in Hamlet for the secrets of Shakespeare’s art. For me, it is the greatest playwright’s greatest play, and though I don’t necessarily expect the reader to share that view, I trust that what I say about it can be generously applied, where appropriate, to all the other plays I might have used to illustrate my ideas.